



## Inishkea Islands

The islands, now uninhabited, serve as a tourist destination, but boast a rich and fascinating history.

Images – Remnants of a deserted house on the Inishkea Islands ([northmayo.ie](http://northmayo.ie)) and day tourists visiting the island ([independent.ie](http://independent.ie))



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# The Inishkea (Inis Gé) Islands

A few days ago marked the sombre anniversary of a tragic maritime disaster that unfolded off the rugged Inishkea Islands, where, on October 28, 1927, a fishing tragedy claimed the lives of several local men. The echoes of their loss still resonate in the hearts of the local community. Today, the Inishkea Islands are uninhabited and serve as a day-trip tourist destination as they boast a rich and fascinating history.

The low lying, exposed, Inishkea islands are off the coast of the Belmullet peninsula. Thought to have been named after Saint Kea who lived there, there are two main islands, Inishkea North and Inishkea South. The islands were populated until 1932 and the remains of two villages can still be seen.

The earliest evidence of island settlement goes back at least 500 years, and the islands contain archaeological sites from the Neolithic age and several early Christian monastic sites. During the early Christian era Saint Brendan and Saint Columba founded monasteries there and the remains of these settlements can still be seen. An early Christian monastery flourished on Inishkea North between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. On the south-west of the island there are the remains of a church dedicated to St. Columba.

On the north-east there are 3 large mounds, known locally as the Baileys – the Bailey Mór, Bailey Beag and Bailey Dóighte, meaning big, small and burnt. There are also a number of megalithic tombs built from 3500 to 2000 BC. On Inishkea South there are cross-slabs and pillars.

One, to the north of the harbour, is a stone with a cross inscribed on it, located at the centre of two circles of stones. It is believed to be a Pre-Christian monument 'Christianised' at a later date.

At the time of Griffith's Valuation in 1855 there were 18 families living on the north island and 35 families on the south island.

Potatoes were grown in lazy beds across the islands wherever there was enough soil to sow them. It is thought that the Famine did not affect the islands as much as the mainland due to the prevailing winds keeping the blight away.

Many of the islanders lived mainly by fishing and the sale of kelp. During the lobster season fishermen lived in primitive huts for up to two months, using homemade lobster pots and fishing from currachs. The lobsters were sold for five shillings a dozen in Belmullet, from where they were sent to Ballina, and also in Blacksod from where they were sent to Achill.

In 1908 a whaling station was established which lasted until 1922. It was said that about 50 whales were caught each year.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> October 1927 ten fishermen from the island drowned. It had been a calm, wet day and when the 30 currachs went out after dark on their usual fishing trip, they ignored the low pressure shown on the barometer. They were only about an hour into the trip when a hurricane came out of the night and tossed their boats around. Eight men from the south island and two from the north island died.

There would have been more casualties but with uncanny instinct some islanders sensed the bad weather and turned for home. After the drowning disaster a national fund was established and nearly £40,000 was collected to give a grant to the bereaved families.

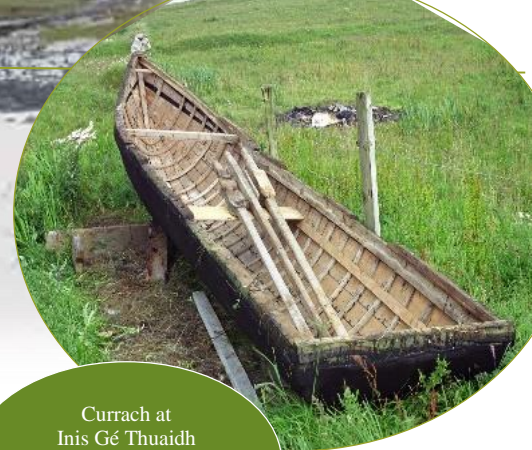
However, the islanders now looked towards the mainland as being safer and a letter was sent to the Land Commission, signed by the islanders, asking for holdings on the mainland close to their fishing grounds.

In the early 1930's the families of both islands were brought to the mainland by the Land Commission. Most were settled in Glosch and Surgeview, Belmullet, on 400 acres bought by the Land Commission from R.J. Reilly of Crossmolina.

The islands were left to the donkeys and the sheep, the birds and the seals, and in the summer the day-trippers who visit. The islands are home to rare birds such as the Little Tern and Dunlin. Barnacle Geese winter there from October to April. The islands low-lying coasts are important sites for the Atlantic Grey Seal and about a third of the national population live there.

Nowadays, boat tours operate several times daily from Blacksod pier ferrying passengers to the island for day trips during the Summer months.

[www.Irishislands.info](http://www.Irishislands.info)  
<https://en.wikipedia.org>  
<https://www.ouririshheritage.org>  
[www.lifeonmachair.ie](http://www.lifeonmachair.ie)



Currach at  
Inis Gé Thuaidh  
([duchas.ie](http://duchas.ie))  
C021.03.00064)

## PAT 'RUA' REILLY

Pat 'Rua' Reilly was, up until his death in 2008, the last living survivor of the terrible fishing tragedy of the night of October 28, 1927. Among those lost were two of his own brothers. Pat was relocated after the tragedy to Glenlara near Erris Head.

([image.themayonews.ie](http://image.themayonews.ie))



Memorial of the Inishkea drownings at Faulmore Graveyard  
([image.goldenlancan.com](http://image.goldenlancan.com))

## DID YOU KNOW?

The ruins of St. Colmcille's Church are located on Inishkea North. St. Colmcille is one of Ireland's three patron saints. The other two being St. Brigid and St. Patrick. Colmcille came to Inishkea North and founded the church there in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the beautiful beaches in Inishkea North  
([image:AnthonyHickey](http://image:AnthonyHickey))